

[By Thatcher Moats](#)

Now that the U.S. Senate has passed a bill that includes key funding measures for flood recovery in Vermont, the action likely will move to a conference committee of lawmakers from the House and Senate, who will have influence over how much disaster relief money the state gets, according to Vermont Rep. Peter Welch, a Democrat.

"The most likely place where we can succeed or fail is in that conference," Welch said Wednesday.

Vermont's congressional delegation has made federal disaster relief a top priority since flooding struck the state Aug. 28, causing major damage to roads, bridges, homes and businesses.

The bill the Senate approved Tuesday was a major step toward getting the money Vermont needs to pay for repairs to the state's battered road network — which accounts for the bulk of the damage.

The Senate vote is a reason for optimism, said Welch, but the fight over funding in the House, which is controlled by Republicans who have sought budget offsets in exchange for disaster relief funding, will be a greater challenge.

"The House is a whole different budgetary battle," said Welch. "It's a tough battle."

Welch wants the House to agree to provisions included in the Senate legislation that would help Vermont pay for Irene damage.

The Senate bill adds \$1.9 billion to the depleted Federal Highway Administration emergency fund that Vermont will depend on for repairing and rebuilding roads, Sen. Patrick Leahy's staff

said.

It also would lift a cap that would make Vermont eligible for road repair money beyond \$100 million.

The federal government, by statute, already is responsible for the first \$100 million, but the estimated damage to state roads and bridges in Vermont is between \$175 million and \$250 million.

Welch said he has been lobbying his colleagues hard.

"He's really targeting people who we perceive are going to be on the conference committee and influential in making that final decision," said Scott Coriell, a spokesman for Welch.

The congressman also met with House leaders in the past 10 days, including Rep. Eric Cantor, the House Majority Leader and a darling of the Tea Party Right.

Welch was joined in his meeting with Cantor by Rep. Chris Gibson, a Republican whose district in New York also was damaged from Irene where they made the case for disaster relief funding.

"The message we were giving Mr. Cantor was the same: This is not about Republicans or Democrats," said Welch. "We understand that we have to pay our bills, but the reason we don't have the offset debate when the river is rising or the house is burning is we need help immediately."

Cantor didn't make any commitments, said Welch.

"He's not giving me an explicit answer but what we're doing is laying the foundation," Welch

said.

Though the conference committee isn't absolutely certain to convene, said Welch, it's likely it will — possibly by the end of this week.

It will include lawmakers from the appropriations committees and the subcommittees, he said.

One reason the committee is seen as the main battleground is because the legislation that comes out of the committee can't be amended on the floor, and whatever comes out of the committee will have the support of lawmakers on both sides, said Coriell.

"The idea is if they strike a deal, it has the support of their respective colleagues in the House and the Senate," said Coriell. "What's promising about the conference committee — if and when a deal is struck — it will be more likely to cruise right through."

Welch said that as he makes his case with other lawmakers for disaster relief funding, he's delivering the message that Vermont always has been willing to help other states when disaster strikes there, and the favor should be returned.

"I made the point an act of God is not anything you can plan for, and Vermonters have always been generous when disaster has struck," said Welch.